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The im-materiality of urban religion: towards an ethnography of urban religious aspirations

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, scholars from a wide variety of disciplines have engaged in the study of urban religion. Taken together, these studies form a paradigm that intertwines (1) the politics of belonging, (2) regimes of space and territoriality, (3) materiality and sensorial power and (4) visibility. We argue that while scholars have conceptualised these aspects in very nuanced ways, there is a need to address in a more rigorous way *immaterial dimensions of urban religion*. We encapsulate these immaterial dimensions in the notion of 'urban religious aspirations', meaning the multiple ideational sources that underpin people's religious investments in urban life. We illustrate the relevance of studying aspirations with an ethnographic example of two Hong Kong Christian women and their involvement in the Umbrella Movement. Exploring their narratives demonstrates the need to take immaterial aspects of religious life into account when researching urban religion, especially in contexts where the distinction between the religious and the secular is less clearly defined.

KEYWORDS Urban religion; urban aspirations; Hong Kong; immateriality of religion; Hong Kong Christianity

Introduction

Any visitor to the city of Hong Kong (located in the southwest corner of the People's Republic of China, PRC) will immediately notice the numerous religious buildings that break up the towering skyline. There is the Taoist Man Mo temple, a popular tourist destination on Hollywood Road (Hong Kong Island); the central Anglican Saint John's Cathedral on a hillside in Central district; various large Catholic churches, e.g. Saint Teresa's Church in Prince Edward (Kowloon) and Saint Joseph's Church in Central (Hong Kong Island); the Kowloon Masjid

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and Islamic Centre on Nathan Road (Kowloon); the Po Lin monastery, now more than a century old, and the adjacent Big Buddha statue on Lantau Island; the Buddhist Chi Lin nunnery in Diamond Hill (Kowloon); the Taoist Wong Tai Sin temple (Kowloon); and the many Tin Hau temples located along Hong Kong's (historical) coastline.

However, Hong Kong is also home to less visible 'hidden religious topographies' (Burchardt and Becci 2013, 12). Finding these requires knowing where to look, or paying very close attention to signage on buildings. Residents and scholars alike are aware of the many Christian, Buddhist and other religious meeting places tucked away in the city, practically invisible to the uninitiated.[1]

While such materialisations of religious life thus involve both the visible and the invisible, there are also immaterial manifestations of religion in Hong Kong, for example, people's motivations in relation to work, leisure time, political engagement and social media participation. Religious orientations can be the main reason behind a Christian's refusal to practise yoga, or a Chinese Buddhist's habit of not eating meat on the first and fifteenth day of the lunar month. They can be the driving forces behind urban resistance movements, or serve as survival mechanisms for immigrants. These facets of urban religion can only be identified, through ethnographic research, by listening to the narratives of urban dwellers concerning their everyday lives. When exploring such individual narratives, the ever-present and often pervasive immaterial power of religion becomes apparent, in both its visible and non-visible forms.

In recent years, scholars from a variety of disciplines (e.g. Becci, Burchardt, and Casanova 2013; Becker et al. 2013; Dodsworth and Watson 2013; Livezey 2000; Margry and Hegner 2016; Pinxten and Dikomitis 2012 [2009], Van der Veer 2015) have engaged in the study of urban religion. On a theoretical level, the discovery that religious life in major cities across the globe is vibrant, vital and highly innovative has disrupted dominant images of urban modernity, along with the established narrative that urbanisation and modernisation necessarily lead to secularisation (Casanova 2013). Instead, studying the vitality of urban religion has allowed scholars to contribute to the proliferating critiques of uni-linear and modernist versions of secularisation theory – formulated by, among others, Luckmann (1967), Asad (2003) and Taylor (2007). In this vein, Beaumont and Baker (2011) proposed the notion of the 'post-secular city' to draw attention to the renewed significance of religious actors in urban life, and suggest that secular definitions of public space and urban administrative practice have lost their former hegemony.

On a demographic level, the reinvigorated interest in urban religion corresponds to the simple fact that more than half of today's world population lives in cities. Levels of urbanisation are especially high in Asia and in the Pacific, with 13 out of 22 mega-cities located in these areas (e.g. Japan, China, Korea, India and Indonesia). Consequently, urban centres have become a key environment for the study of religious identities and practices. Significantly, these processes

of urban growth have also been linked with transnational migration, which often implies the widening of urban religious diversities (Kivisto 2014; Levitt 2007). By implication, transnational migration affects urban religious hegemonies, challenges the ways in which religion and urban identities are coupled and unravels religious power over definitions of urban space. As Saskia Sassen (1992) famously noted, processes of urban growth and transnational migration, together with other aspects of globalisation, have also contributed to configuring cities as social entities in their own right that are often markedly distinct from surrounding nation states. This has raised intriguing questions about the ways in which religion accentuates and co-produces this distinctness of urban territories.

Finally, cities are in an important sense material assemblages, made up of heterogeneous artefacts, technologies and practices, that function as urban 'infrastructures of diversity' (Burchardt and Höhne 2015).[2] Focusing on these aspects, research on urban religion has also allowed scholars to address vexed questions about the role of materiality in religious life in novel ways, and to take on board theoretical ideas from the study of material culture (Houtman and Meyer 2012; Knott, Krech, and Meyer 2016; Meyer et al. 2010).

Inspired by these diverse concerns, anthropological and sociological engagement with urban religion has resulted in an impressive array of studies. We review these studies, suggesting that, taken together, they form a paradigm that intertwines (1) the politics of belonging, (2) regimes of space and territoriality, (3) materiality and sensorial power and (4) visibility. This paradigm is, as we argue, somewhat incomplete. While we appreciate and value its insightful, coherent and ground-breaking qualities, we contend that it can be enriched through a greater elaboration of the *immaterial dimensions of urban religion*. Importantly, we do not advocate a return to an emphasis on beliefs and texts but instead suggest a more complex understanding of the co-productions and entanglements of the material and the immaterial. Drawing on anthropologists Arjun Appadurai (2004) and Peter Van der Veer (2015), we encapsulate these immaterial dimensions in the notion of 'urban religious aspirations', by which we mean the multiple ideational sources – including values, motivations, imaginings and spiritualities – that underpin people's religious investments in urban life.

We illustrate the relevance of studying such aspirations with a short ethnographic example of two Hong Kong Christian women (Ivy and Rebecca) and their responses to the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Large-scale protests occurred in the streets of Hong Kong from late September to mid December 2014. While these protests were primarily politically inspired, for some people they were coloured by their religious orientations. For Ivy and Rebecca, linking their personal Christian views with their political aspirations for 'their' city translated into action. Exploring the narratives of these two women illustrates the need to take immaterial aspects of religious life into account when researching urban religion, especially in contexts where the distinction between the religious and the secular is less clearly defined (e.g. East Asia, and Greater China[3] in particular).

Theories and ethnographies of urban religion: expanding the paradigm

The questions as to who belongs to the city, and to whom the city belongs, are fundamental to both longstanding residents and newcomers. Many scholars have therefore explored the kinds of practices through which religious minority or newcomer communities articulate claims to be recognised as worthy participants in urban society (Bandak 2014; Constable 1997, 2009; Stringer 2013). Conversely, others have examined the strategies of 'place-keeping' (Becci, Burchardt, and Giorda 2017) through which religious majorities are able to secure their hegemonic status, and how such practices may be reinforced in response to the challenges presented by minorities. Contestations around places of worship as well as the use of public space for religious festivals, processions and devotions are often central to the politics of belonging and identity (Bosco 2015). Scholars working on European cities have highlighted how the opening of new mosques can be accompanied by neighbourhood protests, embroiling Muslim immigrant communities and native citizens in power struggles over the cultural definition of particular sites (Astor 2014; Cesari 2006; Hüttermann 2006). Meanwhile in Muslim majority societies, the construction of churches or other public displays of Christian devotion are often highly regulated in the context of power-laden notions of urban order (Bandak 2014; Heo 2013). In South Asia and some African contexts, by contrast, processions play a much greater role in contesting notions of urban citizenship, sometimes leading to violent clashes between different religious communities (Tambiah 1996; Van der Veer 1994; Van Dijk 2001). For diaspora communities of South Asian origin, public urban processions take on a new significance in transplanting familiar ritual into unfamiliar terrains, as David's (2012) study on Hindu processions in London has shown.

Both kinds of issues – places of worship and public rituals, devotions or prayer walks – are intrinsically related to questions of space. They specifically *spatialise* and *emplace* religious identities and forms of belonging in that they mark urban sites as religious – more or less permanently in the case of temples, temporarily in the case of ritual (Burchardt 2017). In fact, as Hervieu-Léger (2002) has perceptively argued, religious traditions are typically characterised by spatial regimes that organise religious life by mapping identities on territories in relationship to modes of political organisation, such as the nation state or city. In this context, most scholars have construed space as a scalar formation made up of either globally networked flow spaces, or territorially bound container spaces; urban agglomerations as hubs for transnational flows of migrants illustrate the first, while the late-Westphalian nation state represents the second (Beyer 2013; Robbins 2004). This conceptualisation has helped to explain why majority religions often seek to represent and defend the space of the nation state, while migrant religions are particularly invested in urban space.

Importantly, most scholars agree that forms of religious belonging and identity in the city and spatialisations of religion are not only materially mediated, but that the materialities of religion impact upon religious experience and practice (Houtman and Meyer 2012; Keane 2007). Material elements such as buildings, clothing and other religious paraphernalia are thus not simply passive containers that express ready-made meaning, but co-produce religious meanings (Meyer 2013). Along these lines, Knowles (2013) has conceptualised the religious aesthetics of buildings in the notion of 'architectural registration' while Beekers and Tamimi Arab (2016) draw on theories of iconicity to explain the contested nature of the repurposing of religious buildings. However, the role of urban materialities reaches beyond clearly identified religious artefacts. As Knott (2015) has shown very effectively in her work on walls as material edges and boundaries, the built environment can itself become the site for reworking, negotiating and enacting urban religious diversity by mediating ideas of separation and openness.

Finally, social science scholarship on urban religion has been driven by concerns over visibility, raising questions about the ways in which religious communities are able to become visible to others in urban societies and via routine urban encounters (Garbin 2013; Hancock and Srinivas 2008). Taking the visibility of religious groups in public space as an expression of power relations and existing cultural supremacies, they have explored the conditions that constrain the visibility of some groups while accentuating that of others, usually majorities (Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri 2014). Again, the conceptual move towards visibility could build on the broader trend towards emphasising the visual as a fundamental dimension of human sociality – termed 'the visual (or pictorial) turn' (Brighenti 2007).

These four conceptual building blocks – belonging, space, materiality and visibility – have provided the basis for notions such as religious place-making – which Garbin (2012, 410) defines as 'the appropriation and experiencing of space through various religious activities' (see also Bielo 2013; Vásquez and Knott 2014) – and home-making (Eade 2012). While these notions are helpful for understanding urban religion, they also entail a number of constraints.

First, since in urban studies cities are chiefly construed as material assemblages, scholars of urban religion often take up such definitions and understand urban religion to mean material expressions of it. This is how the research field has come to focus, to a great extent, on places of worship, material religious symbols and objects. However, it seems that in doing so it has sometimes taken the presence of material objects as the starting point, rather than the practices that produce them. We suggest that this reading of urban religious life leaves out the diverse bundles of religious motivations, values and other ideational elements that inspire people's practices of being in the city, belonging to the city and experiencing the city. As we will indicate in the section below, these bundles of ideational elements can be fruitfully described as 'urban aspirations'.

Second, the emphasis on material signs of urban religion rests on a model of representation in which places of worship, icons or religious processions in urban space are typically construed as *signs* of, and as standing in for, a religious tradition or community as a whole. Similarly, the idea of urban space as a stage for contestations over religious belonging and visibility as means of signalling power and remains indebted to the notion that communities are externally bounded and internally homogeneous. We suggest that retrieving the ideational level of urban aspirations helps us to unpack such totalities and to disrupt the model of representation on which they rely. It allows us to understand how and why members of the same religious tradition may fashion for themselves fundamentally different urban religious lives.

Finally, notions of the spatialisation and territorialisation of urban religion have sometimes engendered the impression that urban spaces are neatly divided (between religious groups, or between religious and secular spaces) and are necessarily religiously marked. They thereby tend to downplay or ignore religious expressions that are spatially unstable, unfixed, evanescent or ephemeral.

Urban religious aspirations are not necessarily part of, or inspired by a politics of (ethno-) religious belonging or identity. Rather, they engage with valued goals and express the desire to become a certain kind of religious subject crystallising around an ethics of personhood (Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005). Furthermore, urban religious aspirations are not fixed to particular urban spaces or, by definition, territorially circumscribed, though the practices they inspire can be localised. Instead, they engage with urban spaces as elements that make it possible to achieve certain goals. Neither are urban religious aspirations material, though the practices they animate certainly co-produce urban materialities; this, in turn, shapes them, in a recursive pattern.

A new perspective: urban aspirations

Above, we have argued that a reading of the material forms of urban religion that ignores the religious labour of producing artefacts and objects runs the risk of reductionism. Often, research on urban religion focuses on how people express their religion through words, images, sculptural or architectural forms or rituals. Birgit Meyer's (2012) concept of 'sensational forms' that refers to material portals, which open up and thus mediate relationships between people and transcendence, is especially useful for capturing the links between experience, intentionality and materiality. As Meyer argues:

> Authorized and authenticated as harbingers of what lies 'beyond,' sensational forms have the double aspect of streamlining or shaping religious mediation *and* of achieving certain effects by being performed. Thus, sensational forms are 'formats,' in that they direct those taking part in them on how to proceed, as well as being 'performances,' in that they effect or make present what they mediate. (Meyer 2012, 26)

We build on Meyer's approach and articulate it with particular attention to the urban domain, and thus to the diverse range of religious motivations, values and other ideational elements that inspire people's practices of being in the city, belonging to the city, and acting within that city. We encapsulate these motivations, values and elements in the concept of 'urban aspirations'. As we show in the case study below, even though these urban aspirations are fundamentally immaterial, they have a definite effect on the production of material expressions of urban religion.

According to anthropologist Peter Van der Veer (2015, 4), 'urban aspirations' is a useful concept for the study of lived religion, especially in urban Asian contexts, as it helps to 'get away from the static connotations of the concept of "identity" that tends to fix people to what and where they are rather than to what and where they aspire to be'. In line with van der Veer, we employ the concept of 'aspirations' to explore the immaterial lived religions of Hong Kong's urban dwellers. Following Arjun Appadurai (2004, 68), we regard these aspirations as cultural capacities, oriented towards the future, related to wants, preferences, choices and calculations. They include ideas and beliefs about 'life and death, the nature of worldly possessions, the significance of material assets over social relations, the relative illusion of social permanence for a society, the value of peace or war'. They determine a person's wants and wishes for material and immaterial 'commodities', e.g. physical goods, marriage, work, leisure, respectability, friendship, health and politics. Additionally, they are part of larger ethical and metaphysical ideas and, as such, are not only individual but formed in interaction with a person's social context (Ray 2006).

The academic debate on aspirations has so far mainly focused on the link between class and economic aspirations. While this link is relatively clear, little attention has been paid to how these aspirations are intrinsically related to people's religious notions and values, and how even economic aspirations may be spiritually guided and/or framed. The same goes for political aspirations. In an attempt to articulate aspirations and religious beliefs, below we investigate the ways in which Hong Kong Christians draw on their specific religious orientations to reflect on contemporary political changes in their city, and how these orientations in turn shape their urban political aspirations.

The case study is based in the East Asian context of Hong Kong. The 'act of being in the world' (Roy and Ong 2011) of cities in this region differs greatly from that of their Western counterparts. Here, religion is often central to shaping urban aspirations. This is chiefly because East Asian contexts are characterised by a less explicitly recognised distinction between the religious and the secular. A focus on such contexts will therefore bring into clearer relief how urban aspirations, which are fundamentally immaterial, have an effect on the production and expression of urban religion in various materialities.

Religion in the Chinese context

Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer (2011) argue that when researching religious life in the contemporary People's Republic of China, two factors need to be taken into account. First, 'local religious practices and their social organisation can be described and analyzed solely through their organic connection to local economic and political life', and second, 'in traditional Chinese society, the latter [local economic and political life] find structure and expression through religious forms' (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 6). In other words, religious and non-religious aspects of life are intrinsically intertwined in Chinese contexts. In fact, in today's China, 'realms of secular and sacred, or public and private, dimensions of religion seem to interweave without clear distinctions of time or place or formal expression. Not apart from the world, this spirituality is practical and pragmatic' (Shive 2011, 241).

So it is evident that in China, religion is understood differently than in Western contexts. A Western, Eurocentric Christian perspective on religion focuses on a religion's canonical texts, doctrinal beliefs, beliefs in transcendent endings of time and emphasises intellectual activities such as the practice of theology and philosophy (Tam 2011). However, 'proceeding from such a normative viewpoint will lead to a misunderstanding of non-Western traditions such as China's' (ibid., 30). Such traditions include *fengshui*, ancestor veneration, belief in ghosts and divination (although such 'religious' practices are at times also described as 'customs').

Historically, religious, political and social domains of life were interwoven in Chinese society. The centre of gravity was the religio-political state. In addition, no religion claimed explicit and exclusive adherence by a majority of the population (Goossaert and Palmer 2011). Religious life did not present itself in neat categories, such as Christianity, Buddhism or Islam. Instead, the 'Three Teachings' (*sanjiao*, i.e. Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism) served the entire community, and people engaged in rituals related to all three. The variety of performed rituals was endless, and practices were often combined (Chau 2011). There was no religious membership; people did not belong to one religion or teaching. Instead, they belonged to a household, clan or territorial unit in which ancestors and patron saints or gods were worshipped (Goossaert 2011). In sum, a distinct 'religious field' (Dianteill 2003) was unfamiliar in the Chinese context; religious knowledge and authority were differentially distributed among clerics and laymen alike (Goossaert and Palmer 2011).

This changed in the late nineteenth century, when the concept of 'religion' (*zongjiao*) was introduced to China via missionaries and other Western contacts. 'Religion' came to be regarded as a strong, moralising, unifying force, related to modernity (Goossaert 2011). Superstitions and old 'customs' became regarded as a hindrance to progress and a threat to China's survival in the modern world

(Palmer 2011). Political discourses likewise changed (Goossaert 2011), with religion now regarded as a domain separate from politics and the economy.

The reality in present-day China differs significantly from this political discourse on religion, especially in rural areas. The official domain of 'religion' does not cover the entirety of lived religiousness in the country (Goossaert 2011). Belonging to a community, rather than believing in a fixed set of doctrines, is still the prime criterion for religious participation in China. The notion of 'belief' exists, but in reality does not entail exclusive faith; instead it concerns the bond between humans, gods and ancestors. In urban Chinese contexts, the situation is different. People do not 'belong' to a clan or lineage, as they do in rural areas. Instead, they tend to engage in individual forms of spirituality, or join globally oriented communities such as Christianity (Goossaert 2011).

Despite the differences between rural and urban Chinese contexts, religion has nowhere lost its importance. Religious traditions, even in cities, are still characterised 'by their location in the midst of everyday life and their focus on practical aid and results' (Overmyer 2002, 4). Fascinatingly, for the most part these traditions are nowadays led, organised and continued by individuals, with or without the help of clergy. For example, Lizhu Fan and David Whitehead (2011) argue, based on their research in Shenzhen, that the moral convictions and ritual practices of urban respondents are a reflection of personal decisions, not pressure of family, village, government or religious leaders. In other words, personal choice has taken precedence over following a leader. In sum, they argue that religion offers people living in Chinese urban contexts personal agency.

Christian political aspirations in Hong Kong: making religion public

In the contemporary context of Hong Kong, religion is similarly a vital part of modern urban life, offering its participants personal agency. One such vital religion is Christianity. In Hong Kong, Christianity is a minority religion, adhered to by only 12% of the population, fewer than half of whom are Catholics (Poon and Stoker 2013). Despite this low figure, evidence of the religion widely marks the city's urban landscape: Christian buildings (e.g. churches, schools and hospitals) can be seen everywhere. More significant for our argument, however, is that Christianity also shapes life in the city in ways that are often overlooked because they are non-visible and immaterial.

This becomes apparent when analysing the narratives of Ivy and Rebecca, two Hong Kong Christian women in their 30s and 60s respectively. The focus in our analysis of their narratives is on their religious orientations in life, and their political aspirations for the future of Hong Kong. We paid particular attention to the question as to how and why these women were politically active during the Umbrella Movement. As we will show, their political actions were to a large extent shaped by their Christian orientations. These orientations shaped the

happenings in the city, not only in immaterial but also in material ways (see also Westendorp 2015, 2017b).

The Hong Kong Umbrella Movement officially began on Monday 28 September 2014, after a week of class boycotts organised by Hong Kong university students. From then on, three areas of Hong Kong were occupied for 79 days: Admiralty, the main occupation site; Causeway Bay, the off-shoot of Admiralty; and Mong Kok, often described as the 'lawless' occupation site, where the leaders of the movement (mainly the Hong Kong Federation of Students, the student organisation Scholarism and Occupy Central with Love and Peace) had no authority and where power lay in the hands of the people. Approximately 1.2 million people took part in the protests at various times and in different ways, an astonishing number in a city of 7.2 million residents. Finally, on 15 December 2014, the Umbrella 'revolution' ended peacefully, albeit without concrete solutions.

The Umbrella Movement was an event of historical significance that brought particular issues in Hong Kong into sharp focus. At its root was the ongoing debate concerning the socio-economic and political relationship between Hong Kong and the PRC following the 1997 handover. This relationship is shaped by the 'one country, two systems' policy – a policy that promises Hong Kong its own judicial, economic, social and political systems, and a continuation of its capitalist way of life for at least 50 years (until 2047). Regardless of these promises, many Hong Kong residents feel threatened by China's increasing encroachment on their everyday urban lives. This perceived threat culminated in the Umbrella Movement.

The Umbrella Movement touched people from a wide variety of backgrounds; Ivy and Rebecca are two examples. They responded to it in ways that, to their eyes, fitted with their Christian orientations and with their ideas about how to act as individual, responsible residents of their city. From their actions, we can deduce that personal beliefs about how to act as 'good' Christians shape the ways in which individuals express and live their religious lives in urban Hong Kong. Moreover, religious beliefs affect the roles they ascribe to themselves in the city, their perceptions of that city and their political aspirations for life within it.

Ivy's political aspirations for Hong Kong include becoming a self-governing region with a strong democratic rule of law, operating independently from the Chinese Government. Even though she is fully aware that the city cannot be completely independent from the PRC, especially economically, she wishes for more democratic freedoms and less interference from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). To make this aspiration reality, she participated in various activities organised by local groups in Hong Kong.

During the 2014 Umbrella Movement, Ivy was very active, joining the crowds in the streets (especially in Mong Kok) whenever her work schedule allowed.

In doing so she felt herself strengthened by the example set by Jesus. In one conversation she explained:

> I can't help but think that Jesus himself was one who was defiant to the law. I thought of how he healed the cripple and the sick on the Sabbath, how he entered the temple to chase out merchants selling stuff, and how he was challenged about why his disciples had not followed the Jewish rule. Quite a lot of things that he did were considered to be in violation of the law. What he did in the temple was destructing the business eco-system and undermining the self-interest of those people who enjoyed status quo in his time.

According to Ivy, Jesus' actions went against the laws and status quo of his time. Following his example, she performed similar acts of civil disobedience. Hence, her response to the political demonstrations stemmed from her attempts to be a responsible follower of Christ. In her own words, this entailed being a person who is:

> …personally engaged in [the] soul-searching process of asking how I relate to the fundamental causes of the movement, pondering what Jesus would have done in the same situation, and finally making up my own mind as to in what way or to what extent I would like to be involved.

By recounting what Jesus did in his day, and by imagining how his actions set an example for contemporary Christians, Ivy located her response to the Umbrella Movement within a Christian discourse. Her view was that all Christians will ultimately be accountable to God for their actions, and that this should colour their response to the Hong Kong protests. For Ivy, this meant being in the streets as often as possible, and joining other protestors in the fight for universal suffrage.

In contrast to Ivy, Rebecca chose to be less personally active, and to show her support more passively. She and her husband visited Admiralty, Causeway Bay and Mong Kok on average once a fortnight, wearing yellow clothes (the colour of the protestors); Rebecca observed what was happening, helped where needed and gave moral support to all parties present. She often posted photos of what she witnessed on WhatsApp, showing prayer meetings or Bible studies held in the streets, slogans written on walls in different languages and youngsters doing their homework in makeshift school areas. She added only minimal comments, often only providing factual information such as where and when the pictures had been taken.

In conversations, Rebecca was reluctant to express her opinion of the protests openly, or take sides, even though her aspirations concerning her city's future were clear. Instead, she tried to understand all points of view and 'turn the other cheek' when confronted with violence or negative opinions. Rebecca had come to Hong Kong from Shanghai as a small child in the early 1950s, fleeing the Communist government. Since then, she had witnessed many local protests in the city and had often joined them in the past, regarding this as an important means of defending the freedoms and rights of Hong Kong and its residents. However, on witnessing increasing violence in protestors' behaviour and ideals over the years, she decided to withdraw her participation. Although in general

she still supports the fight for greater democratic freedoms, she now sees acting as a 'responsible Christian' to mean being present, but avoiding conflict.

These two narratives illustrate two different reactions to the political upheaval that took place in Hong Kong in 2014, both stemming from Christian orientations and similar political aspirations, and as such constitute a response based on immateriality. Ivy was visibly present at the protest sites: her Christian orientation led her to actively oppose the status quo. She chanted slogans and listened to speeches; her voice was heard by others; her thoughts were shared and discussed on the streets and on social media. She played her own particular role within the protests. Similarly, although Rebecca's voice and actions were less prominent, in visiting the protest sites on numerous occasions to encourage protestors, she showed her support and offered others the strength to participate and make their voices heard.

However, the stories of Ivy and Rebecca reveal more than their visible actions might suggest. In important ways, such individuals also shape life in Hong Kong on an everyday basis. Underlying these two women's physical acts are their aspirations for their city: not only political, but coloured by religion. Ivy clearly longs for a city in which the status quo is overthrown and in which individual citizens have greater rights (a possible explanation for her tendency to visit and listen to speeches in Mong Kok over the other sites). For Rebecca, of paramount importance is living in a democratic city that is not unduly shaped by conflict. Like Ivy, she relates to the actions of Jesus, but places emphasis not on the times when Jesus challenged the status quo, but the times when did he not.

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented an overview of the social science debate on urban religion as it has developed so far, and have argued that it should be opened up theoretically to make space for what we term the 'im-materiality of urban religion', in other words: the complex of immaterial–material entanglements that account for the variety of urban religious practices. Until now, research has been based largely on four conceptual building blocks: belonging, space, materiality and visibility. This approach presents a number of constraints, the main one being a lack of sophistication of the immaterial elements in the co-production of immaterial and material expressions of religion. Therefore, we propose a theoretical change in the debate by introducing the critical and innovative role of the immaterial. The conflation of materiality and visibility has led some scholars to limit their remit to the visible, leaving out the diverse bundles of (religious) motivations, values and other ideational elements that inspire people's practices of being in the city, belonging to the city and so on.

By conceptualising the immaterial side of religion we do not seek to privilege internal aspects of religious life over material, but rather call for a more nuanced approach in which both mental processes and material conditions

combine to create religious practices. Materialities of religion such as places of worship, iconic objects or religious symbols should not be reduced to conveyers of prefabricated meaning; they play a part in the production of that meaning (Keane 2007). However, taking human religious creativity and agency seriously also involves exploring the complexity of religious intentionality; in other words, the ways in which religious inspiration of human action is linked to urban aspirations, i.e. people's ideas of personal *becoming* through the pursuit of valued goals in concrete urban lifeworlds. We argue that immaterial mental processes crystallise into valued goals and technologies of the self, turning an individual into a particular kind of ethical subject. Material religious assemblages both result from motivations and practices of this kind, but also shape them as they unfold and circulate through urban space. However, through our Hong Kong case study, we have also illustrated that religious expressions can be spatially unstable, unfixed, evanescent and ephemeral and may thus be relatively independent of material carriers.

On a meta-theoretical level, conceptualising the immaterial side of urban religion also calls for revisiting the meta-theoretical and ontological assumptions undergirding recent work on cities and urban religion. Overall, understandings of cities as material assemblages have been indebted to post-humanist, transhumanist and anti-humanist epistemologies and ontologies, as chiefly promoted by actor-network theory and other new materialisms. However, urban sociologists such as Silke Steets (2016) have drawn on the sociology of knowledge, especially Berger and Luckmann's concept of the social construction of reality (1967), and argued that objects and buildings are more usefully understood as 'material objectivations', and architecture as a 'social construction'. Following this idea, we suggest that particular urban sites are not 'infrastructures of religion' per se, but that they have to acquire religious meaning through people's active investment in them. In African cities, for instance, nodal points of urban risk acquire particular significance by the ways in which they are seen as spiritually dangerous and acted upon through prayers aiming to enhance spiritual security (Burchardt 2017). Significantly, this implies that subjectively meaningful maps of religious sites, or 'religious topographies', are not necessarily identical to those officially recorded.

On a methodological level, as we have indicated, this subjective and ideational level is best addressed through the analysis of individual narratives that allow us to trace the ways in which people attach meaning to their movements through urban space, the religious *inspirations* that animate them and the urban *aspirations* towards which they are directed.

Future research should further explore how the different elements of what we tentatively called the immaterial dimensions of urban religion – religious inspirations, motivations, valued goals, affective orientations, spiritual understandings – are related to one another. If we assume that the study of immaterial religious aspects, such as urban aspirations, must have a place in the social

science debate on urban religion, what would such a study look like? How do we theorise the 'immaterial'?

Notes

1. See also Westendorp (2017a) on the invisibility of religious buildings and centres in Hong Kong's build environment.
2. On this aspect, see Farías and Bender (2010), Day (2014), Fan and Whitehead (2011), Kong (1993) and Orsi (1985, 1999).
3. 'Greater China' includes Macao, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

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